

## Family-friendly pilot project offers options for IRTA trainees

By Eddy Ball

About half of the trainees working at NIEHS in established research programs could potentially qualify for an NIH pilot program known as Keep the Thread.

Intramural Research Training Award (IRTA) fellows may be able to negotiate flexible work arrangements with their supervisors and the Office of the Scientific Director, to accommodate family care needs, such as the birth of a child or the care of a family member. Following their standard eight weeks of paid parental leave, or for situations not covered by parental leave, IRTA fellows may be able to modify the duration of their training time at NIEHS, so they can continue to pursue their career goals, by keeping the NIH training thread intact.

“Keep the Thread offers the kind of support I wish had been available when I was a young mother pursuing a career in science,” said NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., who was part of the working group that developed the pilot project. “I’m glad to see so much support for the project here and at NIH in Bethesda, and I hope it helps young scientists balance work and family during critical periods in their training.”

### Eligibility depends on type of training award

As intriguing as the summary of the new program sounds, Director of the NIEHS [Office of Fellows’ Career Development](#) (OFCD) Tammy Collins, Ph.D., is eager to underscore the caveats, and help potential participants fully understand the pilot program.

“Because of visa requirements, foreign nationals on J-1 visas aren’t eligible to take part in the program, and research fellows, who are term-limited federal employees, already have access to NIH programs for what are known as full-time equivalencies, or FTEs,” Collins explained. “But, even though they can’t reduce their effort under Keep the Thread, visiting and research fellows can still negotiate flexible full-time schedules and telework options with their supervisors.”

According to information about the program, Keep the Thread is an option for IRTA fellows, not an entitlement, and there can be significant financial trade-offs to consider.

### Stopping or slowing down the training clock

Negotiating a flexible schedule under Keep the Thread doesn’t increase the amount of stipend a trainee can receive as an IRTA, only the period of time over which that stipend may be prorated. IRTA trainees can receive up to five years of support, but, with Keep the Thread, the option exists to receive that five years of support over a longer period of time for trainees who gain approval for a temporary reduction of effort.

### Making an informed decision

Launched by the Women in Biomedical Careers Committee of the NIH Intramural Research Program, Keep the Thread is a three-year pilot program to increase flexibility for NIH intramural fellows who need alternative career development schedules. The goal of the program is to encourage trainees to stay connected to the NIH community during times of intense personal or caregiving needs, in order to facilitate eventual re-entry into full-time research.

Taking an extended leave of absence or temporarily reducing effort could have unintended consequences for a trainee’s career. Collins explained that trainees should meet with a career counselor and schedule one or more follow-up meetings. OFCD also offers several materials for trainees and their supervisors who are considering the Keep the Thread option, including a detailed checklist for outlining the agreement.

“While this program isn’t for everyone, it has the potential to help people better balance work and life during their time as IRTA trainees,” Collins said.

For more information, IRTA trainees and their supervisors should contact Collins by email at [tammy.collins@nih.gov](mailto:tammy.collins@nih.gov) or by telephone at 919-541-3344. Detailed information about available options, what forms need to be filled out, and who is eligible, is also available on the NIH intranet site at [http://sourcebook.od.nih.gov/prof-design/Keep\\_the\\_Thread\\_2012.docx](http://sourcebook.od.nih.gov/prof-design/Keep_the_Thread_2012.docx). ([http://sourcebook.od.nih.gov/prof-design/Keep\\_the\\_Thread\\_2012.docx](http://sourcebook.od.nih.gov/prof-design/Keep_the_Thread_2012.docx))

In addition to temporary reduction of effort to a level equal to or greater than 40 percent of full time, Keep the Thread options include flexible scheduling, telework, working as a special volunteer, and fee-for-service as a contractor. The length of time permitted varies with each option.

Working a reduction in effort schedule will affect pay and may impact benefits for IRTA trainees. In order to retain full coverage of health benefits, fellows must work a minimum of 80 percent, or 32 hours per week.

With a temporary reduction below that level to 40 percent or greater, fellows must contribute a percentage of health costs equivalent to their percent reduction of effort. Special volunteers pay for health insurance out of pocket, and contractors are not eligible to participate in NIH health insurance plans.



*According to Collins, NIEHS Scientific Director Darryl Zeldin, M.D., fully supports the new program. "Darryl has even advertised this [Keep the Thread] several times himself," she said.*

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